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ABSTRACT

Based on Henry David Thoreau's book "Walden," this lesson plan presents activities designed to help students understand that acquisitiveness and simplicity can be opposing life philosophies; and that both philosophies have had notable adherents. The main activity of the lesson involves students researching historical characters (including Thoreau) and participating in an expert panel. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)



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TITLE OF LESSON PLAN:

Walden

LENGTH OF LESSON: Two class periods

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

SUBJECT AREA: Literature

CREDIT: Gretchen C. Surber, history teacher, Woodbridge Senior High, Woodbridge, Virginia.

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand the following:

1. Acquisitiveness and simplicity can be opposing life philosophies.
2. Both philosophies have had notable adherents.

MATERIALS:

For this lesson, you will need:

Biographical reference works

PROCEDURE:

1. Inform students that successful television shows and dramas have been based on the premise that individuals from various eras, some of whom may now be deceased, come together for a meeting. These people would never have met in real life, but audiences are fascinated by what they might have said to one another *if* indeed they had somehow met. Explain that the students are going to simulate one of those television shows or dramas by holding a panel discussion of prominent people who have remarked on or demonstrated their ideas about acquisitiveness versus simplicity as a lifestyle. Students will have a chance to select the panelists in addition to Henry David Thoreau.

2. Go over the basics of panel discussions:

- The panel is made up of experts (often five or six) on a preselected topic (for example, the place of materialism in the panelists' lives). The individuals are often chosen because they have some experiences in common and some that are different.
- The discussion consists mostly of remarks by the members of the panel to questions and comments from a moderator and other members of the panel.
- The questions can ask for facts or opinions.

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3. Ask students what they think are the moderator's responsibilities. Explain the responsibilities as follows if necessary:

- Setting up the room or auditorium to make discussion easy and to help the audience hear questions and responses
- Explaining why the panel has been brought together
- Introducing each member of the panel (There should be a name tent for each panelist to sit behind.)
- Clearly stating each question, directing it to the panel at large or to one individual, then giving other members of the panel a chance to respond
- Calling on panelists who indicate they have questions for one another
- Pointing out to the audience the points on which panelists seem to agree and those on which they seem to disagree
- Watching the time and eliminating some planned questions if necessary
- After the moderator and panelists have asked their questions, opening the floor to questions from the audience
- Summing up the discussion and thanking participants and audience members

4. Go on to elicit or state the responsibilities of each member of this imaginary panel, as follows:

- Becoming very familiar with the details of the person's life by doing research in primary and secondary sources
- Determining what the person might have thought about particular issues
- Preparing to respond to the overarching topic of the panel—acquisitiveness versus simplicity as a lifestyle
- Contributing to the discussion by listening actively and indicating that he or she has questions or comments about what another member has said
- Giving copanelists time to respond; that is, not monopolizing the discussion

5. Having shared your expectations for the panelists and moderator, now ask for volunteers or select students to assume the roles of moderator and Thoreau. Finish casting by assigning students to play the following persons or other persons suggested by students for this panel discussion:

- Mahatma Gandhi
- Cornelius Vanderbilt
- Henry Ford
- Andrew Carnegie
- Bill Gates
- Mother Teresa

6. Give all panelists an opportunity to conduct research about their characters. The moderator should also familiarize himself or herself with all the characters. Each student working as a panelist should concentrate on learning about the person he or she represents but should learn a little about the other leaders as well so that all panelists can engage in meaningful conversation among themselves.

7. To help ensure that the panel discussion is lively, direct the panelists and moderator to meet in advance of their appearance before the audience. At that meeting, the participants should discuss what questions the panelists can anticipate from the moderator so that they can reflect on how they will answer the questions and, if necessary, review additional documents and other materials.

8. Proceed with the panel discussion. See Evaluation, regarding a postmortem on the strengths and weaknesses of the participants.

ADAPTATIONS:

Play the role of the moderator yourself, controlling the difficulty and intensity of the questions you ask the panelists.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. One of Thoreau's desires was to simplify his life. Explain how you would simplify your own life, giving consideration to Thoreau's meaning of "clutter." Is simplification just a matter of renouncing possessions, or is it something more?
2. Discuss the changes in American society and culture brought on by the Industrial Revolution, and how those changes may have sent Thoreau running for the woods to commune with nature.
3. "To suck out the marrow of life" is a quote from Thoreau. Explain what is meant by this advice for living advocated by Thoreau.
4. Discuss the symbolism in Thoreau's decision to retreat to Walden Pond on July 4th, 1845.
5. Analyze one of the six quotes displayed in Walden and debate its meaning. What does the quote reveal about Thoreau, and could the quote be applicable to modern life?

EVALUATION:

With the students who will be in the audience for the panel discussion, consider developing an evaluation chart that they can use to rate each participant. Qualities on which participants could be rated include the following:

- Familiarity with details of subject's life
- Clear, easy-to-hear speaking skills
- Level of participation
- Quality of questions asked

You may suggest students use symbols to indicate how a participant performs on each measure—perhaps, “+” for “good,” “-” for “poor,” and “*” for “excellent.”

Collect the evaluation sheets. Review them, keeping your own evaluations of each student in mind. Meet with each participant individually to discuss his or her strengths and weaknesses.

EXTENSION:

A Quiet Place

Take a walk outdoors. Seek out an area with trees or some other natural setting. Sit quietly, and record in a journal what you see, hear, and smell. Then tell how this setting makes you feel.

Simplify!

Keep a three-column log for one day. In the left-hand column, note the time. In the middle column, describe your behavior and environment at that time. In the right-hand column, describe what if anything Thoreau might recommend you modify in your behavior or environment to keep it simple.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Cape Cod

Thoreau, Henry David

The book is a result of several journeys to Cape Cod, of which Thoreau discusses in detail one journey in October 1849.

The Thoreau Log: A Documentary Life of Henry David Thoreau

Raymond R. Borst (Editor), New York, Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992

WEB LINKS:

The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau

This highly informative site gives both the teacher and the student information about Thoreau and his works. There is also a section on the era of Thoreau's writing.

<http://www.library.ucsb.edu/depts/thoreau/>

CyberSaunter—Henry David Thoreau

This site has many images and texts on Thoreau, his writings, and those places he frequented. This site correlates Thoreau as a writer and an environmentalist.

<http://www.umsa.umd.edu:80/thoreau/>

Henry David Thoreau

This site has everything you need to know about Thoreau. There are e-texts and pictures that can supplement your study of Thoreau.

<http://miso.www.com/~jej/1thorea.html>

Walden Pond

This site contains a full text version of *Walden* and some beautiful full-color pictures of Walden Pond.

<http://www.concord.org/~kathy/Walden/WaldenPond.html>

Thoreau's Cape Cod

This is a fantastic site that takes the learner on a textual, audio, and video tour of Thoreau's Cape Cod.

<http://www.virtualcapecod.com/thoreau/>

VOCABULARY:**abolitionist**

One who favors the abolishment of slavery.

Context:

Many of its [Concord, Massachusetts] leading citizens were active in or supported the abolitionist movement.

transcendentalism

A philosophy that asserts the primacy of the spiritual and transcendental over the material and empirical.

Context:

These were the Transcendentalists.

Oversoul

The absolute reality and basis of all existences conceived as a spiritual being in which the ideal nature imperfectly manifested in human beings is perfectly realized.

Context:

Emerson calls it the Oversoul.

renaissance

A revival of intellectual or artistic achievement and vigor.

Context:

It is to the Transcendentalists that Concord owes its reputation as the home of what American literary history calls the American Renaissance.

imperialism

The policy of extending a nation's authority by territorial acquisition.

Context:

Thoreau felt very strongly about such moral issues as slavery and imperialism.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

Benchmark: Analyzes the effects on the text of the attitudes and values of the time period in which a text was written.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates competence in general skills and strategies for reading literature.

Benchmark: Makes abstract connections between one's own life and the characters, events, motives and causes of conflicts in texts.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates a familiarity with selected literary works of enduring quality.

Benchmark: Demonstrates an understanding of why certain literary works may be considered classics or works of enduring quality and substance.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: history

Standard: Understands how the Industrial Revolution, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed American lives and led to regional tensions.

Benchmark: Understands the impact of the Industrial Revolution during the early and later 19th century (e.g., the impact of industrialization on the environment, the growth and spread of the factory system in New England, labor conflicts of the antebellum period).

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: history

Standard: Understands the sources and character of reform movements in the antebellum period and what the reforms accomplished or failed to accomplish.

Benchmark: Understands the ideas of Transcendentalism (e.g., views of Transcendentalists about individualism, society, good and evil, authority, tradition, and reform; similarities and differences between Transcendentalists and evangelical Protestants).

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Walden



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- Ecology
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- Mathematics
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- Technology
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Video Description

Emphasizing spirituality over materialism, this classic of American Transcendentalism urges people to free themselves from the "quiet desperation" of their lives. You'll visit Walden, where Thoreau conducted his experiment in simple living.

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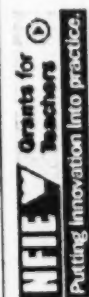
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Video Information and Comprehension Questions



Video Description

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TITLE OF VIDEO:

Walden

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why is Walden of relevance to young people?
2. What changes were taking place in American society during the time Thoreau wrote?
3. What did the Transcendentalists believe?
4. Who was Thoreau's mentor?
5. How much did Thoreau's house near Walden Pond cost to build?
6. How long did Thoreau stay at his cabin at Walden Pond?

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Walden

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. Why is Walden of relevance to young people?

Walden is of particular importance to young people because, like Thoreau, they have yet to establish their independence. They are trying to find themselves and their place in the world.

2. What changes were taking place in American society during the time Thoreau wrote?

The Industrial Revolution, the women's movement, and growing division between North and South were all taking place in America at the time the book was written.

3. What did the Transcendentalists believe?

Transcendentalists believed in a direct relationship with God, and a universal soul. Thoreau himself believed he could find God in nature.

4. Who was Thoreau's mentor?

Ralph Waldo Emerson was Thoreau's mentor.

5. How much did Thoreau's house near Walden Pond cost to build?

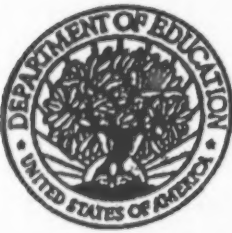
Thoreau's house near Walden pond cost \$28.12 to build.

6. How long did Thoreau stay at his cabin at Walden Pond?

Thoreau spent two years, two months and two days at his cabin.

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